

COMMUNITY SUPERVISION OF THE FEEBLE-MINDED

An Analysis of Three Hundred Families in Which there is Mental Defect

PURPOSE OF STUDY

“There are reasons for believing that feeble-mindedness is on the increase, that it has leaped its barriers, so to speak, as a result of changed conditions of civilization.” This was Dr. Walter E. Fernald’s opinion in 1915 when he mapped out a plan for a state bureau which should be made responsible for the supervision, assistance and control of the feeble-minded at large in the community who are not properly cared for by their friends.

Three years have passed since then and Massachusetts’ progress can be summed up in a sum of money and a tract of land which, if we have patience, will probably be translated into a third school for the feeble-minded now that the war restrictions on building have been lifted. There has also been some legislation and a gradual swing of the pendulum from the impracticable theory of complete segregation to the possibility of successful supervision in the community.

This development of the idea of state supervision is not based upon the results of experimentation, either intensive or extensive, which would justify definite conclusions, but here and there small studies have seemed to point the way to its expediency, not as a complete solution of the problem but as an integral part of a workable state program. It is not community supervision versus segregation but authorized state supervision plus segregation. This means an intelligent differentiation between the mental defectives who can be helped to live happy, clean lives in their own homes with safety to the state, and those who cannot. As Jessie Taft, social service director of the committee on mental hygiene, New York State Charities Aid Association, says: “It

really is not a question of whether or not a system of community supervision of the feeble-minded will be simple or cheap. It is a question of when we are going to begin to do this thing which has to be done before we can get any further with the problem of feeble-mindedness."

Such studies as have been made of supervision in the community are of the feeble-minded who have previously had the steadying influence of training, either in special classes of the public schools or in state institutions. This means not only that the persons under observation have had a better industrial preparation and the even more important moral equipment which comes with the intangible loyalty tug of a graduate group, but it means also the elimination of the most obvious anti-social characters to begin with. It is possible that the results might not have been the same if a group of corresponding mentality had been chosen from the community at large.

Dr. Fernald's program depends for the local administration of such supervision upon the use of properly qualified volunteer social workers, or existing local private organizations dealing with dependents or delinquents throughout the state. If such a plan were adopted the state bureau would undoubtedly refer back to the reporting agency any feeble-minded person whenever supervision seemed feasible. With this in mind the League for Preventive Work has made an analysis of three hundred families for the purpose of knowing something of the quality of the feeble-minded material upon which social agencies must expend their continuous skill if community supervision is to be more than a temporary salvage of the less fortunate to the ultimate detriment of themselves and others.

SELECTION OF MATERIAL

It was the original purpose to include every family which had come under the care of the welfare agencies of the League for Preventive Work during the year 1917 in which there was at least one member diagnosed as a mental defective. The stress of work and the changing personnel of staffs did not make this possible and for convenience the first three hundred received at the office of the League were

taken for the study. The ten agencies which participated in the compilation of the data are the Associated Charities of Boston, Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Boston Society for the Care of Girls, The Church Home Society, Society for Helping Destitute Mothers and Infants, Boston Dispensary, Boston Children's Friend Society, Federated Jewish Charities, Instructive District Nursing Association, Massachusetts General Hospital Social Service Department.

METHOD OF TABULATION

The analysis was made upon a carefully worked out card which gave both the present status of the family during the episode which brought it in 1917 to the attention of the reporting agency; and the past factors in the history of the family.

The families are from all over Massachusetts, although a large majority are in the eastern cities and towns. They represent twenty-seven nationalities.

MAKE-UP AND SIZE OF FAMILIES

Two-thirds of the families have both parents living but it would be false to record them as normal families. Many are broken homes with father and mother living apart so that in less than half (45 per cent) of the whole group there is a possibility of normal home life. As is usual among mentally subnormal groups, the rate of children is high: the numbers range from one to eleven, nearly fifty per cent having four or more children. There are sixteen hundred living persons in these three hundred families.

Among these three hundred families there are only 369 persons who have been definitely diagnosed as feeble-minded, but add to the three hundred and sixty-nine feeble-minded, one hundred and fifty-two who in the opinion of the visitor should have mental examination and twenty-six who are suffering from epilepsy, insanity and psycho-neurosis, and you see home after home where the mentally blind are being led by the dim vision of the sub-normal. The total number of persons listed as mentally handicapped (548) is one-third of the entire group of sixteen hundred and the end is not yet.

Table Giving Make-Up and Size of Families

Number of Children	NUMBER OF FAMILIES						Total
	Both Parents	Mother only	Father only	Neither Parent	Unmarried Mother ¹	1 Parent and 1 Step-Parent	
0	2						2
1	24	6	1	8	20	2	61
2	28	10	1	1	5	1	46
3	25	6	3	2	5	1	42
4	33	3		2	1		39
5	27	7					34
6	32	4	2				38
7	14						14
8	11	1					12
9	5			3			8
10	2						2
11	2						2
	205	37	7	16	31	4	300 Total

There is no greater danger in reading figures en masse than that of forgetting that back of each unit is a living personality, varying in individuality from any other living being. Out of this below normal group of between five and six hundred there emerge children of school age — girls and boys starting out to work — unmarried mothers — housewives and older men. These are reacting upon each other and upon the community at large. Take, for instance, the mentally handicapped children of school age from these families. There are 205 between five and sixteen years; 33 of these are in institutions for the feeble-minded; 135 feeble-minded and 37 sub-normal go daily to the public schools, some of them are in special classes but many are in the regular grades, living through a weary routine of study they do not understand. With them on the way to school go 363 brothers and sisters, from present appearances mentally normal.

As to the feeble-minded persons sixteen years and over, there are 162 women and 29 men. Seventeen are in a

¹ Pregnant mother, when unmarried, counted as mother and child.

State School for the Feeble-Minded, seventeen in other state institutions and the other 157 are fitting into unskilled work as best they may.

OTHER SOCIAL LIABILITIES

The analysis shows also that feeble-mindedness draws to itself many undesirable companions from out the other groups of social liabilities.

The following factors are present in the case histories of these three hundred families where there is feeble-mindedness, ranging in the order given from more than half the families, to nearly one quarter: Physical handicaps in 54% of the families; Alcoholism in 40%; Immoral conduct, 39%; Lack of support, 39%; Neglect, 37%; Illegitimacy, 35%; Court record, 35%; Juvenile delinquency, 24%. Each adds a burden to a family not too well equipped for the usual struggle towards economic self-sufficiency.

PHYSICAL HANDICAPS

The physical handicaps which are found in more than half of the families are tuberculosis, the venereal diseases and their close allies, crippleness, deafness and blindness in equal proportions, that is, each is found in fifteen per cent of the total three hundred families; cardiac trouble in an appreciable though considerably lesser amount; and a multitude of other diseases.

ALCOHOLISM

Alcoholism was recorded only when there was convincing evidence of the abuse of alcohol. It means, in other words, grave intemperance in two out of every five of the three hundred families. Among those listed as alcoholic are sixty-seven feeble-minded women and thirteen feeble-minded men; fourteen of these alcoholic women are housewives and mothers with increasing family cares.

IMMORAL CONDUCT

Immoral conduct was recorded only when there was convincing evidence of condition though not necessarily sufficient for conviction. Adultery and fornication head the list of the specific charges.

NEGLECT

Among the one hundred and eleven neglected families, eighty-two were physically neglected, fifty-five morally and thirty medically. These three types of course frequently overlap in the same family. Yet nevertheless the record remains of neglect in more than one out of every three families.

ILLEGITIMACY

Illegitimacy is also found in more than one out of three families. Among the three hundred families there were 124 illegitimate children and sixteen pregnant unmarried mothers.

COURT RECORD

A court record is found in one-third of the families. Delinquency falls about evenly upon the shoulders of the feeble-minded and those who have not been so pronounced by medical authority. Among the feeble-minded the ratio is two to three between male and female, but among others than the feeble-minded by far the greatest amount of delinquency emanates from the fathers, especially the alcoholic fathers. Included in this group of court records is juvenile delinquency which has crept into approximately one in every four families. Of course as this analysis is being made from the family standpoint frequent delinquencies in one family even if perpetrated by several persons or by the same person in several instances would be counted but once. But it is obvious from the above figures that juvenile delinquency and adult misconduct often occur in the same family.

As delinquency may happen many times among the individuals of one family, so each of the other liabilities frequently occur more than once in each household, greatly increasing the family difficulties. Moreover, the different social liabilities accompany each other and feeble-mindedness seldom falls singly upon families known to private agencies. Social liabilities fall in great numbers upon this much afflicted group.

The most striking fact is that nearly three-fifths of these families have four or more of the ten social liabilities which are leading factors in the disintegration of family life and civic welfare. (See Chart, opposite.)

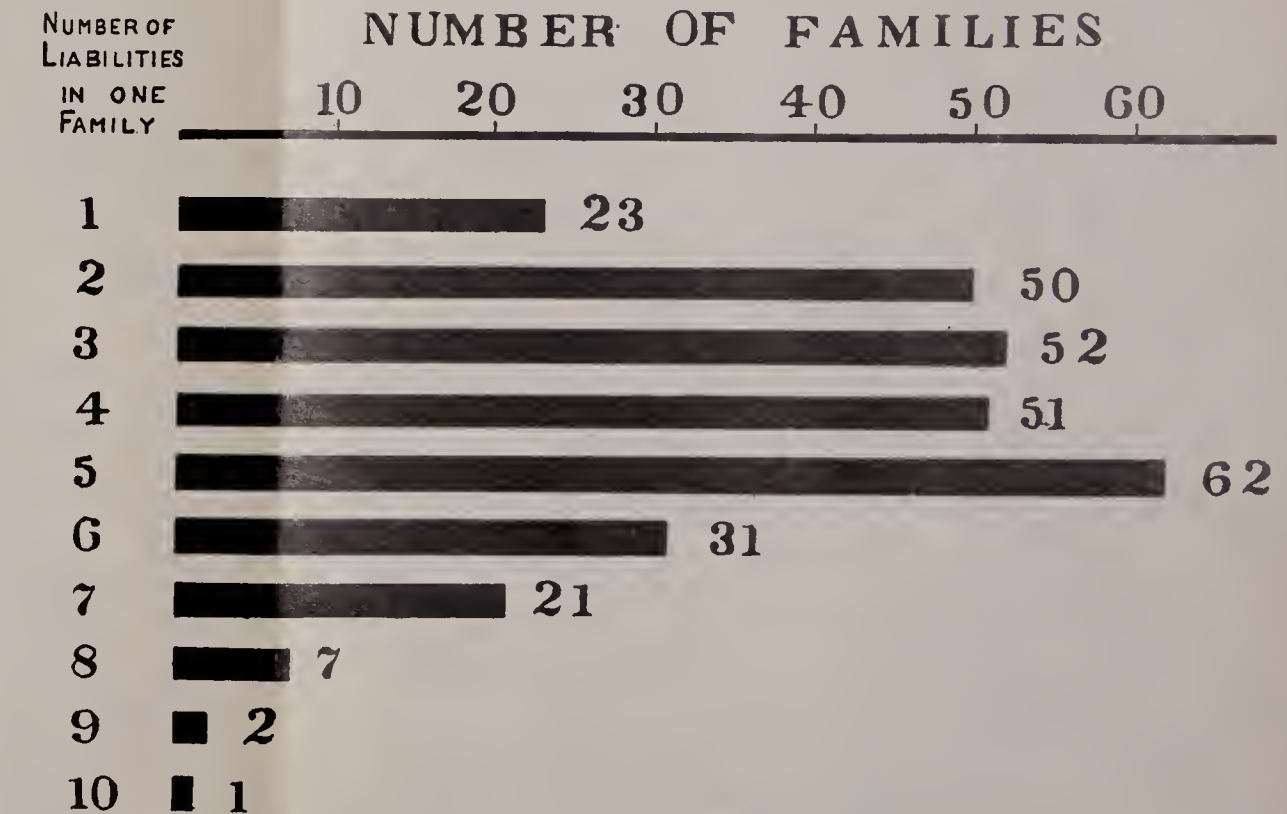
Combinations of Social Liabilities Found in 300 Families where there is Feeble-mindedness

10 ABCDEFGHIKL	6 ABCOE G	5 ACDE L	4 ABCD F	3 ABC E	2 AB	1 A
9 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCOE G	ABCGH	ABD G	ABF L	AB	A
8 ABCDE GHKL	ACDE GH	ADFGH	ADFG	AED K	AB	A
7 ABCDEFGHIH	ADEFGH	ADEFH	DEG	ABGH	AB	A
6 ABCDEFGHIK	ABDEFGH	ACDEH	ABEF	ABCH	AB	A
5 ABCDEFGHIK	ABD FGK	ABCD L	ACEF	ABCH	AB	A
4 ABCDEFGHIK	ABD FGK	ABCD L	ABGH	ABE L	AB	A
3 ABCDEFGHIK	AC EFGH	ABCD K	ABD F	ABCD L	AB	A
2 ABCDEFGHIK	AC EGHK	AC EGH	ACD FG	ABCD L	AB	A
1 ABCDEFGHIK	ACDE GH	AB E G K	ABCD GH	ABCD G	AB	A
10 ABCDEFGHIKL	ACDEFG	ADEFH	ABD GH L	ABD G K	AB	A
9 ABCDEFGHIK	ACDEFG	ADEFH	ABD G	ABD G	AB	A
8 ABCDEFGHIH	ABCFGH	ACD F H	ACDE K	ABD G	AB	A
7 ABCDEFGHIH	ABCFGH	ABD FG	ADFG L	ABD F K	AB	A
6 ABCDEFGHIK	ACDE G K	AC EGH	ACD F K	ABD G	AB	A
5 ABCDEFGHIK	ABDE G K	ABDE K	ABCE K	ABD G	AB	A
4 ABCDEFGHIK	ACDEFG K	ACDEFG	ABD F K	ABD H	AB	A
3 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
2 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
1 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
10 ABCDEFGHIKL	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
9 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
8 ABCDEFGHIH	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
7 ABCDEFGHIH	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
6 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
5 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
4 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
3 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
2 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A
1 ABCDEFGHIK	ABCFGH	ABD F H	ABD F	ABD F	AB	A

Each bar represents one family.
Each lettered square represents a social liability in the family.

SOCIAL LIABILITIES RECORDED

"A" — Feeble-mindedness
"B" — Physical Handicaps
"C" — Alcoholism
"D" — Immoral Conduct
"E" — Neglect
"F" — Illegitimacy
"G" — Court Record
"H" — Desertion or Non-support
"K" — Juvenile Delinquency
"L" — Epilepsy or "M" — Insanity



LEAGUE FOR PREVENTIVE WORK, 1918

Combinations of 2

1	2	3	4
1 2	1 3	1 4	1 5
2 3	2 4	2 5	2 6
3 4	3 5	3 6	3 7
4 5	4 6	4 7	4 8
5 6	5 7	5 8	5 9
6 7	6 8	6 9	6 10
7 8	7 9	7 10	7 11
8 9	8 10	8 11	8 12
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25 26	25 27	25 28	25 29
26 27	26 28	26 29	26 30
27 28	27 29	27 30	27 31
28 29	28 30	28 31	28 32
29 30	29 31	29 32	29 33
30 31	30 32	30 33	30 34
31 32	31 33	31 34	31 35
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42 43	42 44	42 45	42 46
43 44	43 45	43 46	43 47
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46 47	46 48	46 49	46 50
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48 49	48 50	48 51	48 52
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It seems to be apparent from this chart that the social status which these various combinations of liabilities imply is too low to permit of any chance of safe-guarding a feeble-minded person in his own home where there are four or more of these social liabilities.

Among the groups having four or more liabilities the combinations are so varied that no axiomatic principle can be found. For instance, one cannot say given feeble-mindedness and physical handicap in a family this or that handicap will follow, but it does seem beyond question that feeble-mindedness and any other three or more of these liabilities combined would render a family totally unfit to properly safeguard a feeble-minded person even under the most skilled supervision from either public or private agencies. The only opportunity for the feeble-minded from such families must come through early training in the State Schools. Many should have permanent custodial care but selected boys and girls among them might later be adjusted to life in the community under more favorable environmental conditions and skilled supervision after the best that is in them has been made the dominant traits in their character through the school training.

Following a theory of elimination then for the purpose of finding a minimum standard of family life where community supervision might be tried with a fair possibility of success, we should omit families having four or more of the social liabilities here considered.

Families having feeble-mindedness alone for the most part eliminate themselves from consideration. They come to the attention of the society because of the feeble-minded person in the household who is so low grade as to be unfitted for home life and in need of permanent custodial care. This leaves one-third of the whole three hundred who have feeble-mindedness combined with only one or two other types of social liabilities. Even now the whittling down process must proceed, for even in these less handicapped groups there are still certain combinations which would be inimical to supervision in the home — such as where the feeble-minded person

would be under the care of some one in the home who was not mentally normal, or physically or morally fit, or where the feeble-minded person is a physical or moral menace to the home and neighborhood.

This crab-like approach to the question of supervision in the home not only brings out the fact that there are a multiplicity of factors of grave social significance in two-thirds of the families, but also that possibly one-fourth of the families are potentially able to care for their feeble-minded children in their own homes if they could be given intelligent supervisory aid.

CONCLUSIONS

How far is this study of general application? During the last three years the League for Preventive Work has had registered with it 2,778 diagnosed feeble-minded persons, who have been in need of assistance from social service agencies throughout Massachusetts. More than 1900 of these are in the community without permanent or authoritative supervision. The ratio is as one to two, male to female; the males are examined for the most part in the school age, the females later in the child-bearing age, when disaster has overtaken them. The same ratio of sex and age holds among the feeble-minded in the study. Also a comparison of the proportion of persons registered and the proportion of families in the study furnished by the same agencies shows almost twice as high a rate in the registration from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children as in the study. That is pre-supposing the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to have the lowest strata of family life of all the agencies contributing to the study, the group would be of a higher grade than the families found in the registration at large. As the three hundred households studied are the households from which have come one-seventh of the feeble-minded persons registered, it is fair to assume that similar or even more extreme social disintegration would be found among the whole registra-

tion population. In other words, the conclusions drawn from these three hundred families are applicable in general to all families known to private social agencies where there is diagnosed feeble-mindedness. They cannot, of course, be stretched to cover the feeble-minded whose lives in sheltered and self-sustaining homes never bring them in touch with social service agencies.

A similar study of families of economic and social independency, where there is feeble-mindedness, would undoubtedly reveal quite different possibilities and such a study is much needed. But despite the fact that this analysis is rather on the negative than the positive side, it gives some inkling of the problem which confronts the social service agency in community supervision of the feeble-minded and points one way of approach which at least gives a promise of success. And it must be remembered that it is the feeble-minded whom the social agencies know for whom state supervision is most needed, not only for their own benefit but for society at large.

Community supervision is coming. It is in the air. But it is not enough to plan for this alone. With it must go hand in hand a comprehensive and continuing state policy for all the feeble-minded. Out from the background of these three hundred households stand examples of mental subnormality needing every type of present care — the child mentally unfit for regular classes in the public schools, too low grade to benefit by special class instruction, growing up on the street because there is no room in the state institutions — children in the grades hampering the progress of their fellow-pupils and losing their rightful opportunity for mental training because there is no room for them in a special class — children going out from the special class room and failing to fit into regular work because there is not enough follow-up supervision to go round — feeble-minded boys and girls and men and women on probation, in the courts, in reformatories and prisons, all needing special treatment because of their mental lack — feeble-minded children adopted by other families and normal children adopted into mentally sub-normal households — feeble-minded un-

married mothers — and feeble-minded men and women gravely handicapped with physical as well as mental defect. These show the cost to society in human welfare and in dollars and cents of a dyke-stopping finger system of unrelated efforts, each splendid in itself but making no headway against the increase of feeble-mindedness because disconnected in their functioning. The forces fighting to overcome feeble-mindedness must be consolidated if the mental defective as well as the mentally normal person is to have his inherent right as an American citizen to develop the best that is in him.

Let doctors, judges, lawyers, teachers, social workers, legislators and all other thoughtful people get together. The time is ripe for a united drive for a public department on feeble-mindedness.

Nobody knows and nobody needs to know the exact number of the feeble-minded in Massachusetts before a state plan is developed.

We do know that at the present time there are some 2,800 patients in Waverley and Wrentham and small private schools for the feeble-minded and there are 624 on the waiting list at Wrentham; that there are 213 reported in the local almshouses; that there are 102 feeble-minded children at Tewksbury and the State Minor Wards has another 132 in special boarding homes; that some of the social service agencies throughout the state have voluntarily registered with the League for Preventive Work 2,700 in the last three years; that wherever intelligent interest is aroused in the feeble-minded there they are found in large numbers; that there are 3,000 children in special classes throughout the state and the superintendents of schools estimate that 4,000 more would benefit by similar training.

We know enough of the numbers to know that we want a state bureau devoted exclusively to feeble-mindedness. Whether it is a department of a present commission or a new commission by itself is comparatively non-essential — the important thing is to have at the head of it a man or woman as director whose first object in life is to solve the problem of feeble-mindedness for Massachu-

ts. Then out of such a bureau would come facts and figures and action which would make a state program more than a scrap of paper.

There are three reasons why this is the appointed hour:

First. The State is relieved of the necessity of large war appropriations for the coming year and has a million and a half more from the income tax than it had last year.

Second. The citizens of Massachusetts are in the proper state of mind to wish to develop big functioning agencies.

Third. Precedent warns us we shall not get it any too soon if we begin now.

New York this year has created a new permanent commission on feeble-minded and adopted a broad state program. How much longer shall Massachusetts wait?

AMY WOODS,
General Secretary.

Outline of a Tentative Plan for the Control and Prevention of Feeble-mindedness in Massachusetts

Formulated by the League for Preventive Work, June, 1918

- 1 Provision for complete physical and mental examination of every child sometime before it leaves school.
- 2 Clinical opportunities extended throughout the community in order that potential dependents and delinquents may be discovered and cared for before they become a public liability.
- 3 Equipment of all courts in the state with the necessary medical, clinical and social mechanism so that the judge may have the benefit of expert advice in making a proper disposition, and the law-breaker may have the benefit of such advice for his development and re-education.

- 4 Supervision by some public body of (a) the feeble-minded who under supervision may be safely entrusted with community life, and (b) the feeble-minded who, needing institutional care, must live in the community until custodial provision has been completed, such oversight to be established not on the basis of espionage but for the development of the individual's highest usefulness, consistent with community safety.
- 5 Additional provision for those who cannot be entrusted with free life in the community: (a) Schools for the training and educating of the younger and higher grade defectives which will fit some of them to go out into the community under supervision; and (b) Industrial colonies for the lower grade and other defectives who need permanent segregation, although never having been convicted of crime; (c) Colonies for defective delinquents who have been convicted of crime and who, because of their mental defect, are unable to be returned into community life.
- 6 A public department on feeble-mindedness either as a bureau of the Commission on Mental Diseases or as a separate commission on feeble-mindedness to develop and administer a comprehensive state program.